

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spiegel

This conversation between the renowned feminist psychiatrist, psychoanalytic psychotherapist and group analyst, Estela Welldon, and Sigal Spiegel, is the second in a series of planned intergenerational conversations between what are usually termed second-wave feminists and what could be referred to as the ‘daughters’ of this generation. These conversations aim to elucidate what we see as inherent tensions in all articulations of the maternal - tensions, however that manifest themselves in particular ways in intergenerational contexts. As we have argued elsewhere¹, these dialogues offer opportunities for the ongoing work of tracing and creating maternal genealogies through the active consideration of cultural psychosocial constructions of the maternal as they become apparent within historical/generational and biographical contexts.

Here Estela Welldon and Sigal Spiegel discuss the difficult terrain of female perversion and its relation to the maternal, using Welldon’s seminal book, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood* (1988), as their point of departure. Drawing on her considerable expertise and specialization in psychoanalytically informed clinical work with sexual perversion, Welldon argues that the source of perversion for both men and women (perversion understood in its precise psychoanalytic sense²) can be found within the early relationship with the mother. The perverse individual, she claims, has usually experienced some form of early maternal abuse, neglect or deprivation and this ‘maternal perversion’ is partially created and exacerbated by the occlusion of female perversion from social representation. If maternal perversion lies outside of the symbolic, it remains the unspeakable core of perverse psychic states, rendering us unable to think through perversion, towards compassion. One consequence of this occlusion is that the maternal body itself becomes the object of envious and murderous attacks, usually symbolic, but at times literal, most clearly seen in instances when the pregnant body is attacked.

Although this argument in which perverse mothering begets perverse offspring, begets perverse mothering, may be in danger of laying the source, and hence the responsibility for perversion back at the door of the mother in a familiar mother-blaming cycle, Welldon is

making a subtly different point. The importance of her work is that in breaking the taboo around female abuse and female capacities for maternal cruelty, she makes visible the continuum between perversion and the ever-present psychic demands of motherhood. In doing so, she gifts us the capacity to recognize the enormous strain motherhood places on women through noticing when it goes wrong. In recognizing this psychic struggle, she enables us to see through perverse acts, towards an aspect of suffering that underpins them. Welldon refers to the aetiology of perversion as ‘intertwined with the politics of power; one aspect is psychobiological and the other social. [...] [a social in which] women are seen as part object, a mere receptacle for men’s perverse designs’ (Welldon, 1992: 104). She points us towards the juncture between social structure and personal biographies as that which facilitates perverse behaviour, thus enabling us to recognize and empathize with both maternal perversion and the ordinary strains of motherhood: ‘Whereby the mother feels not only emotionally crippled in dealing with the huge psychological and physical demands from her baby, but also impotent and unable to obtain gratification from other sources...it is then that she falls back on inappropriate behaviour; this in turn, makes her feel powerless. Simultaneously, and paradoxically, she experiences her perverse behaviour as the only power available to her through her exclusively emotional and physical authority over her baby’ (Welldon, 1992: 83).

At first *Mother, Madonna, Whore* was received with huge disbelief. Only later, as evident from the introduction to the 1992 edition, did people become more able to think about the realities of maternal abusive behaviour. One of the consequences was that women could now be seen to engage in perverse acts that were not merely the adjunct to male sexual perversion. Helena Kennedy claims that the feminist context at the time was one in which a mythology had been created of women being better than men, a myth that Welldon’s book broke, hence the ambivalence with which the book was received in some feminist circles (Kennedy 2009). Paul Verhaeghe writes, ‘to publish a book about motherhood as the seat of perversion in the feminist climate of the time was just another way of trying to commit suicide’ (Verhaeghe 2009: 184). He maintains that what has been important to Welldon, however, has not been political correctness, but clinical correctness. Where Welldon, as a feminist, might have had both women’s and mother’s rights in mind, as a clinician she felt she

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spiegel
Introduction Sigal Spiegel and Lisa Baraitser

needed to follow through on what she had encountered, despite the response it provoked. She locates, in this interview, this capacity to follow through on her clinical convictions at the time, as itself a feminist gesture, one that was ‘for women’ rather than against them, although it took time for this to become apparent.

In her current discussions with Sigal Spigel, it is clear that her early work is as compelling and troubling as it was when it was first published. Here she discusses contemporary developments in theorizing the maternal, as well as changes in social structures, including the increase in men’s involvement in mothering and the role of grandparenting in different social contexts.

Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser.

Sigal: I've been re-reading your landmark book, *Mother, Madonna, Whore: The Idealization and Denigration of Motherhood*, which was first published in 1988, 21 years ago, and I was struck by how painfully relevant it still is; relevant for thinking about perverse motherhood, about gender differences, and about maternal power. It is also a book about how the extreme can tell us something about the less extreme, about ‘just another mother’ to use a phrase from your recent talk.

Estela: Absolutely.

Sigal: The book basically threw into the public domain the idea that the reproduction of motherhood is also the reproduction of perverse motherhood, as Juliet Mitchell put it in her introduction to the second edition. That sounds to me like a radical statement, even in 2009. I think even now this idea can make some people, professionals and laypeople alike, shift uncomfortably in their chairs. The idea that mothers, particularly highly distressed mothers, but also any one of us, are capable of being abusive towards our children is a difficult one. It is still a shocking revelation, isn't it?

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Estela: It is a shocking revelation every time, as you say. At first, the book was taken very badly, including by feminists. I always tell the story of this feminist bookshop in Islington that refused to stock the book on the grounds that it was mother-blaming. But you just need to read the book to see that it is for women - for helping women, especially mothers who were in this extreme situation and who needed to be heard.

Sigal: Though I can see how it might be understood as such. Your argument is not about blaming mothers, it is much more forceful: it is about the capacity of women who are mothers to perform perverse behaviour towards their children.

Estela: Yes and I think it is important to notice that every time we hear about abusive mothers it is a shock. The consequences are that the mother involved is never allowed to talk about her feelings of despair, and her feelings of uselessness. Every time the response is 'Wow! This is terrible'. Now we have Baby P - but actually we have so many different Baby Ps. We just tend to forget from one case to the other. We have become accustomed to living in an uncaring, blaming society. We tend to look for who can we blame, rather than taking in, and digesting the situation. That could help us be much more open and understanding towards these mothers. What we can't see is that these women are not able to talk to anybody because there is no possibility for them to be heard. That's a problem. And then, because we tend to judge and condemn these mothers and never understand what is going on in their situations, we also need to look at this from a trans-generational perspective. We have to look at least two generations back, if not more. This is very important if we want to understand what happened. What is amazing is the lack of compassion towards these mothers. I am also amazed by the polarization between men and women that we see manifested in various forms of media; how men are being seen in a completely different light to women. Until very recently, men were strongly penalised in cases where there was evidence of sexual abuse. Since society was not able to think about female abusers, women were not apprehended or even detected, whereas for men, in any suspected case involving sexual abuse, it was immediately assumed, and presumed, that they were the guilty ones. Also, the climate of

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

incredulity about women being implicated, or being the instigators of sexual abuse, meant they were not even heard or understood in their very difficult predicament, a predicament that entails feeling like ‘murdering their children’, at moments of hopelessness and impotence in dealing with them. I mean there are so many different cases in the press and it is still not being taken in.

Here is another example: a few months ago the Chair of Barnardo’s, the children’s charity, gave a lecture that was published in all national newspapers in which he suggests that adoption laws should be made much easier in this country, implying that for some children it would be better to be adopted than to "force" their families to take care of them, if members of those families were psychologically unable to do so. Wow! He got it! [laughs]. My word, he really got it... We cannot accept that perhaps some women, although they do want to be mothers, are not necessarily psychologically equipped to deal with all the demands of motherhood. We should not be condemning them, we should be understanding them.

Let’s think of another example that appeared in the paper: a woman takes some security money and leaves her school-age children. People are shocked. I said to myself: she is not idiotic, she knows she is going to be caught and brought back, and will have to face the consequences. What we have to see then, is that we, as a society, we are not offering her any support. In my mind, she is in such despair that she cannot even think about who to talk to about this, who to confide in about it. I imagine she feels totally uselessness and in despair. She cannot talk to anybody. So she does stupid things... It is stupid.

Sigal: If we take this argument a step further then she is actually doing her children a favour. She feels she cannot look after them and perhaps she hopes that someone else will take good enough care of them if she is to disappear.

Estela: Exactly. She may even fear unconsciously that she might want to kill them. Sometimes doing these ‘stupid things’, like leaving your child, is a very protective measure.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Sigal: Yes, I agree. Though it is very difficult to accept. Even less dramatic behaviour, such as sending very young babies to nurseries, is met with such serious criticism: concerns regarding the wellbeing of the babies and the psychopathology of the mothers. This behaviour attracts lots of anger, which would be interesting to think about.

Estela: Absolutely. I had a patient years and years ago. She first sent me a letter, in which she said that she had five children. One had been taken away from her and she was pregnant again. She also said she was living with a partner who was very brutish to her - not to the children, but to her. But obviously, with the children being witnesses to domestic violence, there was also a degree of abuse. She also told me about being sexually abused by her step-father, her teachers and all the parental figures in her life. Now what did she do with her oldest daughter? She took that daughter to be baby-sat by her mother and her step-father (the one that abused her). All the children were taken away, including the little baby. She was a very courageous woman who clearly wanted to face her problems. She came to group therapy, and in time, all her children came back to her except for that older girl, because she said 'I cannot deal with her'. Which also, in a way it is a fantastic admission to make.

Sigal: I think so.

Estela: She said that for a long time this little girl was trying to tell her something, every time that she collected her from her mother and step-father. And she couldn't hear her. And eventually, one day the child told her clearly how her grandfather was regularly abusing her. Then my patient described how everything went red and she began to beat her head against the wall. And then she said something that a lot of women say, 'If only I could turn the clock back'. For me, that is associated with remorse. It is the understanding that it is impossible to erase the experience, and that it is there forever. This is what a lot of women, who have abused their children or been participants of sexual abuse, or physical abuse, say. In a way she couldn't escape her fate. It reveals an enormous ambivalence: I want my child to have better life, but at the same time she asks, at a psychic level, why should my child have better life than I had?

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Sigal: It is perhaps an unavoidable repetition, sending her daughter to experience what she went through, and possibly using her to distance herself from this part within her, but also to try to make a change.

Estela: Yes.

Sigal: I wonder whether we could discuss now something slightly different. I was thinking about the way you built your argument in the book. You show in a very methodical way how the evidence for maternal capacity to abuse was always there, but authors, usually clinicians, couldn't talk about it. It seems so difficult still to acknowledge, not just female perversion, but *maternal* abusive behaviour. Your work is being used in forensic contexts, but beyond this context it is still a big taboo. We can now talk more openly about maternal ambivalence thanks to your own contributions, and those of Rozsika Parker's and others, but maternal cruelty is still a taboo - it's the unspeakable. What is it about maternal abusive behaviour that cannot be acknowledged?

Estela: People think of motherhood as some sort of a magic wand by which all problems will be solved. Even now, how often do you hear colleagues saying 'My patient is doing much better. She is pregnant now'? For many clinicians, pregnancy is the equation of good mental health. But this is not necessarily the case. It could just as easily be an act of revenge. Women get pregnant for all sorts of different reasons and it is not always a sign of healthy mental life.

Sigal: Yes, and you show it very clearly in your book.

Estela: But people want to stick to the version that takes pregnancy and motherhood to be the markers of health.

Sigal: So, I'm wondering why, as a society, we can't give up on this narrative that equates motherhood with mental health. Why is it still so difficult? Why is your book still so radical?

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Estela: Don't you think that it is about the Madonna and the baby? It is very strange: when a woman is pregnant it is obvious that she has had sex. But as soon as she is pregnant she is now a mother to be, she is not associated with sex any more. So there is this tremendous, obstinate need to stick to something that is not true.

Sigal: So you are suggesting that there is a sort of transformation in our minds: that the moment a woman becomes pregnant we tend to erase...

Estela: All sexuality. Even Freud, in talking about woman's sexuality saw it as the "dark continent". Although, when a woman is pregnant she obviously has had sex, so sex is not all a "dark continent". When I was in America somebody said 'how can this Wellldon do this terrible thing to poor Madonna? Now she has Lordes (Madonna's baby daughter), why can't she leave her alone?' Because of the title of the book, they assumed I was talking about the pop-star Madonna, because I put the word Madonna next to whore in the title of the book. And now she had become a mother. Why I don't allow her...

Sigal: to live in peace now she is a mother!

Estela: Yes. We want to call it idealisation, but it is equally denigration, because it doesn't allow women to become anything else but mothers. You become a mother and therefore this is the culmination of all your dreams, of all your wishes and desires. That's it for you.

Sigal: So for you, part of our difficulty in acknowledging maternal perversion is our need to keep mothers 'pure', without sexuality, and this type of idealisation is at the same time quite destructive for mothers.

Estela: Oh yes. Yes.

Sigal: And you think that there is still a very active denial of sexuality when considering

Estela Wellldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

maternal subjectivity. There seems to be another theme here that is worth discussing; the divorce between female subjectivity and maternal subjectivity, where the latter supposedly lacks sexuality that can appear in motherhood only in a perverse manner.

Estela: Yes.

Sigal: I wonder whether we can discuss the perverse aspect in all of us, not just in those who act upon their fantasies like your patients. It is important in this context to draw the line between unconscious fantasies and desires, and actual acts of abuse. I was wondering whether discussing or trying to understand the extreme - mothers who physically and sexually abused their children and mothers who have killed their children – can also shed light on the psychology of all mothers, those of us who might have fantasies which we would never act on, or mothers who simply abuse their children in an ‘everyday’ manner – I am not sure how to phrase it. I mention it because I sometime think that this is a feature of motherhood that is missing when we talk about maternal subjectivities. There are of course the two central works on related issues - Roszika Parker’s and your own - but it is not really part of maternal discourse, and to an extent it is perhaps because it is so difficult to acknowledge.

Estela: Let's say for example, you are in the Post Office and you see that a mother is not treating her child well. Then you have to say, 'listen you shouldn't be...' The mother turns and says, 'this is none of your business'. We are in a situation where the mother feels the care of her child is her exclusive dominion, and it's under only her control. As members of society we should be able to offer some help, albeit not judging the mother when she is feeling so powerless that she has to appeal to abusing attitudes.

Sigal: So you are saying also something about the isolation of mothers.

Estela: Yes. Isolation.

Sigal: Interestingly enough, Lynne Segal who was interviewed in a previous issue of *Studies*

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

in the Maternal, also talked about the isolation of mothers as a phenomena that the Women's Liberation Movement really tried to make visible and do something about. But I think you are trying to say something different, about motherhood being kept in the private domain. On the one hand, as a feminist of the same generation you would probably agree with Lynne that isolation works against mothers. At the same time, I hear you saying that isolation also works against the community since it doesn't allow enough monitoring, when monitoring is needed - and that's the clinician in you that 'talks'.

Estela: Yes. We then can't interfere. That's the problem. It is also a difficult problem about judging - it's one thing to ask, 'do you need any help with this child'? The problem comes with our judgmental response. We are all mixed up in this, we are all sort of collaborators in this problem.

Sigal: At the same time I guess it is important to mention that many of us are actually quite worried about the State monitoring of mothers, as reflected in ideas about good mothering, pushing mothers to work etc. It seems that at times there is a bitter tension between feminist and clinical interests.

Estela: Well here we are again in conflict: things are not as plain or simple as they superficially appear to be. For example, some women may feel "liberated" or better appreciated if they spend sometime outside the home, with all the chores and enormous demands that this implies, but that are not always acknowledged. We may have to get to an agreement of women who are mothers of small babies to work part-time, or have a pool of women who can change places with other mothers in the working situation and in the taking care of their babies. We also have to expect fathers to share in the rearing of babies, and they would have to work less hours, or have a more flexible timetable.

Sigal: Well you are making some great suggestions. In a recent paper¹ that is partly autobiographical, you talk amongst other things about your son's involvement with his own child's upbringing. Observing him and his friends, you've been suggesting that mothers are

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

not so much on their own any more. You seemed to think that fathers are much more involved nowadays in raising their children.

Estela: Yes. For example, I admire Winnicott's work, but still the father is absent there. It is only the mother, the father is somewhere in the background, but I think it is changing.

Sigal: Well, you suggest that fathers are the new grandmothers, in terms of the work they do for the mother and for the child. That's a very interesting observation. Would you like to say more about that?

Estela: This generation has been brought up by people who were very much aware of issues of equality, and they are very much moving towards sharing the work.

Sigal: I guess you refer here to a very particular group of people within this generation.

Estela: Yes, I think it depends very much on class. I mean, some time ago you wouldn't see a man pushing a chair. Pushing a... what's the name?

Sigal: A buggy.

Estela: You wouldn't see any man... I mean how many years ago. And now you see it across all social classes.

Sigal: Well, I am not sure whether I completely agree with you, and though I am not really happy with the following dichotomy, I think that there is a difference between activities that you do with your child in the public sphere, like taking them to the park, and things that are done in the domestic sphere, like waking up in the middle of the night. Even my father, who wouldn't have ever received a feminist-of-the-year award, took us to the park, to the cinema, and so on, and that was many years ago. The male head-teacher in my son's school baby-sits his baby daughter in the office and people think that it is very cute. I imagine fewer female

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

head-teachers bring their baby daughters to work. So I am kind of wondering about the changes - could it possibly be that fathers are still more comfortable with performing in the public sphere? I am more interested in what you were saying about fathers who change nappies, who wake up in the middle of the night and so on.

Estela: Yes. That I hear from a lot of people too. I think it is because more women are working. It is an example of how the social and the psychological work together.

Sigal: In what way?

Estela: Well, the majority of women in Western contexts have entered the labour-force. That is the sociological bit, so they are tired and parents must share the work of parenting. Psychologically speaking, it is not a situation of abuser or abused any more, everybody has got to contribute to the household. And that is a fundamental change.

Sigal: Still, much of the evidence shows that this isn't the case – that women just do a double shift.

Estela: That is because women are not united in working for the better terms, time and salaries involved. Their own self-esteem or lack of trust in other women, seeing themselves as second rate citizens, make them collude with this system. This is so well realised in Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, who commands a sort of strike, where all women are to stop any sexual intercourse with their male partners in order to stop a war. It begins with *Lysistrata* saying:

There are a lot of things about us women,
That sadden me, considering how men
See us as rascals. As indeed we are.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spiegel
Introduction Sigal Spiegel and Lisa Baraitser

Sigal: On a slightly different note, you do attribute to men ‘mummy’s’ characteristics, meaning that they are like grandmothers. Being like a granny means for me that they are there to help and support, rather than actually doing the mothering work.

Estela: No, I think that except for lactation men can do everything a mother can do. Yes, I think it’s for the same reasons: women collude with the system so they don’t ask for more.

Sigal: You wrote movingly on grandmothing in an autobiographical piece dedicated to women and generational change. One of the motivations for the current series of conversations was to think about the tensions between generations of feminists, and feminists thought.

Estela: You see some grandmothers they feel awful about having their previous role ‘taken away’, and they feel angry. And some grandmothers say they feel very happy that now they are relinquished from that, and they can just play with their grandchildren. But some of them feel very resentful... Well of course, it also has to do with their relationship with the daughter and the son.

Sigal: I thought that your description of how one needs to let go of the child was a description of a graceful letting-go.

Estela: Exactly. You have to. I don't know whether you have the same with your own patients but I mean if I hear a woman whose son is married talking about his wife and the problems he has with his wife, she needs to remember and to remind him that he needs to talk to his wife, since she is her son’s partner and not his mother. She is *his* wife. Your function is over now. You have to allow the separation, and you have to allow this new attachment. The attachment of your son to his wife is a very important one - you cannot interfere. You need to let him grow individually. That is... the function of motherhood or parenthood - let's say it is that.

Sigal: It is interesting that you are now referring to parenthood, because I was wondering

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

whether this description of yours, of stepping aside, is actually yet to appeal to the capacity of mothers to let go? In her piece, *Motherhood Today* (2005) Kristeva reminds us of maternal love and hate as being mobilised to enable separation. She also refers to letting go as a sublimation of aggression.

Estela: Yes. I agree - to allow them to grow.

Sigal: I am interested in your view about the changes, if any, in writings about mothers since your book was published 21 years ago.

Estela: I mean, I see more and more psychoanalytic writings about perversions, but not much more on mothers really. During the last 15 years a lot has been written about perversion in a rather abstract way, such as writings on perversion and fantasies. This has been taken over by clinicians such as Anna Motz, who continues my own work, but with more severe psychopathologies, such as treating mothers who actually kill their children. She has written extensively about this, and about self-harm.

Sigal: Psychoanalytic writings often emphasize the complicated and messy relationship between daughters and mothers. Do you think your description of the 'stepping aside' that grandmothers do would have been less graceful had you been discussing daughters rather than sons? Is it easier to step aside with sons?

Estela: I think perhaps separation is easier when we deal with mother-son relationships. I think perhaps mother-daughter relationships imply much more of a sense of identification, and a lot of envy too, from mother to daughter.

Sigal: Yes, we hear a lot about the daughter's envy, but much less about maternal envy, especially when coming from a mother.

Estela: Yes, and it is true. I hear it and I see it: young women having babies raise lots of envy.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

I mean you know as a mother, there's never another relationship like having a baby. It is a perfect combination of needs and wants, so obviously that's why there is so much envy. Your breasts are beginning to ache when the baby is beginning to wake-up feeling hungry. Whenever else do you get that sort of conjunction, and sense of serendipity? If we are looking for relationships like that in our lives, my God, we are not going to... to find it very easily, or perhaps ever. Because everything has come together - the harmony, it can be extraordinary, whether it is a baby girl or a baby boy.

Sigal: Well I guess that, at least in fantasy, it's a perfect relationship, even though we know it is not always like that.

Estela: Of course it is more complicated when the child is growing up. Some mothers find it very difficult to see their young daughters grow up into adolescence. Perhaps these mothers do not allow their girls, really to blossom and to grow... In some sort of unconscious way they are interfering with that process.

Sigal: Because of envy. But why is it so difficult to talk about that?

Estela: It is a sense of shame.

Sigal: We can talk now as a society, at least a little bit, about murderous mothers, but not about envious mothers..? Most mothers wouldn't ever kill, but would definitely be envious of their children, for a variety of reasons.

Estela: Well, this is natural.

Sigal: But why is it so difficult to acknowledge?

Estela: I mean you see it in all the religions, maybe. You are supposed to be admiring of that relationship between that virgin and the child. It is so beautiful. Now I am going again to the

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

situation of perversion.

Sigal: Sure, maybe we can then ask whether an understanding of those who crossed the line can shed light on the rest of us? Whether it can help us to think about maternal 'everyday perversion'?

Estela: Ok then, let's talk more about extreme cases. I call it 'malignant bonding'. And it is to do with people both of whom were abused, who get together. It happens usually without knowing; victims of abuse - sexual, physical, or psychological - have a sort of a radar, they find each other and they get together. After that they start talking about their lives and something that was considered a taboo has now become established as no longer a taboo, and as such it doesn't produce the sense of sexual tension and excitement, a sort of sexual risk. So children are now the object of transgression. They start trying to look for ways to transgress against their children as a means to obtain that forbidden sexual excitement. You mentioned repetition earlier, this is most important here. I find it very painful to observe that they have to use means of repetition, like video cameras for instance. There was a couple who were baby-sitting a three month old baby and both rape the child, and both were videoing this situation to see it again and again. And if you remember the case of Myra Hindley...

Sigal: Yes.

Estela: Her act of participation was evident when the child was crying, saying 'Myra, please let me go. Please let me go'... So then it became so obvious that she was not just a victim of Ian Brady, but she was very much part of it. So my idea now about perversions is somewhat related to ideas raised by Amber Jacobs in her book, *On Matricide*. I think now that the object of envy is not just the penis, it is not just the breast or the capacity to give birth, it is the pregnancy, the pregnant body. It is when a woman is pregnant, blatantly showing that there has been an erect penis and the semen to the womb to implant it, and I think that's the object of envy... That they have the possibility of that complete union, and the production of a neonate. And though of course, having a child is related to being pregnant, it is not the same

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

situation.

Sigal: No. Absolutely not.

Estela: I have just read about a woman who was talking about feeling so in tune when being pregnant, she had sixteen pregnancies and abortions - did you read about that?

Sigal: No.

Estela: It is a woman who has had this state of complete ecstasy when she was pregnant. There is far more domestic violence towards pregnant women, and even in the street, pregnant women are more vulnerable to attack.

Sigal: So it is the envy...

Estela: It is the envy of the fulfillment of the union.

Sigal: And therefore the matricide is ...

Estela: Yes, the matricide is denied.

Sigal: was also thinking within a different relational context, about identification, about matricide as identification with filicide fantasies.

Estela: ...and patricide.

Sigal: I think that a very interesting idea that emerges from your theory, is that of relational homicidal fantasies. Again, I am interested in the perverse element within every mother, within mothering, however difficult it might be to discuss it. Perhaps this is a difficult conversation because it does resonate with unconscious, unspeakable, unthinkable fantasies.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Estela: Well I did say that at times we might find ourselves behaving like our parents even if we were sure that we wouldn't behave like them. Smacking our children, for instance in a moment of anger. But the other thing about talking about perversions is that the more bizarre the perversion, the easier it is for people to laugh at it - as an anxious response.

Sigal: Yes. Absolutely.

Estela: But nobody laughs at paedophilia, because in a way we all share the attraction towards young children. The other issue is why we tend to look at paedophiles, and not at the children who have been abused? I mean to see... what sort of child is more susceptible than others.

Sigal: It is a very scary thought; it is easier to think about the perpetrator.

Estela: No, I am talking about some children who are more vulnerable than others, because of the received care or neglect they had as babies.

Sigal: The other interesting theme that emerges from your book is the role of the social in contributing to perverse states of mind. Twenty years ago you wrote that part of the problem lies in society. Because of the way the modern West is structured, motherhood is almost the only space in which women can exercise power, and therefore they are more likely to abuse their only resource, which they find within the mother-child relation. You also said that, "Our whole culture supports the idea that mothers have complete domination over their babies".

Estela: Mm. Oh yes.

Sigal: So basically social structures, as we know them, encourage perversion. Women are 'given' the power of motherhood, and some of them might exploit it almost by the sheer merit of having power.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Estela: Yes, and its easy to see this. I mean why is it so difficult to believe that somebody can abuse their children? I mean, first of all the father, or the male partner gets angry. He is frustrated with whatever. He is in a rage and may physically abuse his female partner, but afterwards he is free to go out to go work, or to see friends, or whatever. The mother then is on her own with the child. The child has now become the weak person, and she becomes the strong one. There is an identification with the aggressor. Why is it so difficult to believe that the mother then will lose her temper and will do something to the child? I mean it is just... It is just a sort of... almost a complete natural sequence.

Sigal: But then are you suggesting that a change in societal structures would somehow lessen the phenomenon of perversion?

Estela: Well I think that... if... both partners share much more in the household situation it will not just be the dominion of women, and women will have other resources for getting angry, for exploding outside there, and not just at home, on her own. But here again, it is an issue of class. Some women cannot escape domesticity, even though now we have such a big push from the State for women to go out to work. It is only when women have other resources available to them rather than just motherhood, that there will not be such a pressure.

Sigal: So you take us back to Simone de Beauvoir, and the idea of motherhood as an oppressive practice.

Estela: Absolutely. And we cannot say that it is oppressive, so we idealize it and have to say that it is wonderful.

Sigal: Yes. Because you also write about the possibilities that motherhood, parenthood, can bring on. And it goes hand-in-hand, because it seems that for you, watching your son and his particular generation doing this kind of sharing, and aiming at more equality, or actually practicing more equality...

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Estela: In an automatic way, it's natural for them....

Sigal: ...this particular group's behaviour is some sort of a response to this oppressive practice.

Estela: Yes, exactly. I mentioned the talk by the Chair of Barnardo's about adoption. Do you know what parents have to go through if they want to adopt? There are so many screenings, committees; it is a shame.

Sigal: But maybe this is another important statement that you are making throughout our conversation, saying, that not everyone should be a mother. For some women it can actually be a really bad choice. You would rather that perverse women wouldn't 'do' mothering, so to speak.

Estela: Again this is to put it too simply. Some women are able to fundamentally change internally, and also externally with better and more adequate resources, and sadly other women are in complete regression when they have a baby, and are seriously incapacitated to function as a caring, protective mother. So better facilities for diagnostic assessments and more appropriate resources should be made available. Women need to have a choice.

Sigal: Not only the choice to abort, but also a choice of whether or not to be a mother.

Estela: Yes. A woman needs to have a choice about this.

Sigal: So as long as there are more options open for women outside the domestic sphere, they will be able to choose whether or not to be a mother. It's interesting because it takes us to your talk where you've mentioned that your father, who was a feminist, wasn't really happy with you being pregnant because he thought that everyone could be a mother, but clever women like yourself can choose not to practice motherhood. And now, many years later you are saying similar things, though not for the same reasons. Where did your feminism take

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spiegel
Introduction Sigal Spiegel and Lisa Baraitser

you? You talk about equality, globalisation...

Estela: Well everything can happen now. Perhaps feminism will go out of fashion. Don't you think?

Sigal: Well, I am not sure we can let it go out of fashion.

Estela: I don't like young women who are sort of dismissive, and they don't know anything about feminism.

Sigal: What you were saying about motherhood as an oppressive practice is still very much relevant for many women. So yes, there are some communities where it is possible to share the realities of this experience, and women who are mothers do work, and think, and experience their subjectivities in so many ways. But, definitely in global terms, women are still looking after children. Motherhood is either very idealised or oppressive. So, in that sense I am not sure feminism will disappear, or at least that it should disappear. I am not sure that it really achieved...

Estela: We have not yet reached that level.

Sigal: I definitely agree with you that with more equality something will happen. It is interesting to see, as social structures change, how it affects our psyches. Will perversions disappear for instance?

Estela: Yes. That's right.

Sigal: Your project assisted in making maternal cruelty visible. It corresponds to feminists' concerns that focused on making maternal subjectivities visible. I wondered what kind of concerns you have now? What do you think of current concerns?

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

Estela: Well, my concern is that we stopped where we stopped. That is my concern. What we need to do now is to be able to give these people a hearing and to provide them with help, psychological, sociological, whatever help there is, otherwise we go on and on and on reproducing the future mothers and fathers of baby P. We will never stop. We will never stop. And I feel very passionate about that.

Sigal: Do you think that we need to do that by psychological means?

Estela: That's what I mean, whatever means, because for example... I don't know exactly whether it is economical... the economic situation is also very important. But the fact is that... I think that it is a good thing for women to be pushed out to work. It is important for their self-esteem. Once you have worked... you have established everything about your sense of value by doing something, you are not just... just a mother. Otherwise, having a baby, would be the only way to... to achieve some sort of status.

Sigal: Yes, well, this policy is addressed at working-class mothers who stay at home and are basically being blamed by the government for lacking a work-ethic, and for not aiming high enough. And then, there is the question of what kind of jobs are open to these particular women who are pushed to work.

Estela: Any work... I think any work outside home gives a sense of satisfaction. And it has to be paid!

Sigal: It reminds me of a quote from your book which seems relevant here: “perhaps if women had a longer tradition of belonging to the power structure their attitudes towards men and children would not be governed, as they are now, by a weakness which they strive to turn into possessiveness and control”. Basically, you are suggesting that when that happens, i.e. if social structures change, it would mean that perverse motherhood would decline.

Estela: Yes. Absolutely.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser

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¹ See *Studies in the Maternal* 1(1).

² In Welldon’s view, ‘perversion is neither the negative of psychosis nor a defence against psychosis or a psychosis itself (views held by Glover, Klein’s followers and Etchegoyen). It is a manic defence against the dreaded black hole of depression, concealing unconscious suicidal ideations or the risk of a completed suicide. As usual, Winnicott provides much enlightenment in all areas of psychic exploration filled with paradoxical situations. In ‘The manic defence’ he states, ‘Here the key words are dead and alive’ (Winnicott 1935, p. 134). Thus, it can be said that the key quality of perversion is a sexualized manic survival; not the disavowal of castration, but the disavowal of annihilating destruction. Perverse acting out is always self-destructive, in that patients take many serious risks in which they also experience, or from which they derive, a great sense of excitement that acts as a reinforcement that they are still alive’. Welldon, E (2009) *Dancing with Death*. *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 25: 149-182.

Estela Welldon in conversation with Sigal Spigel
Introduction Sigal Spigel and Lisa Baraitser